



Great Expectations

By James Forman

The importance of a university education is not seriously disputed in the United States. Most Americans agree that, whether one is seeking what former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli called “a place of light, of liberty, and of learning,” or simply the opportunity to earn 75 percent more than the average high school graduate, a college campus is the place to look. Even as our primary schools are routinely attacked for under-performance, our higher education system continues to draw students from around the world.

Nonetheless, America’s institutions of higher learning should not be immune from criticism. In an *Atlantic Monthly* cover story, Jennifer Washburn of the New America Foundation argued that universities’ increasing reliance on corporate sponsorship threatened their independence. Many authors in this issue of *TAE* challenge our higher education system as well: Their common theme is that our nation’s universities have become less and less ideologically diverse, as administrators, professors, student activists, and even textbooks have become increasingly, and one-sidedly, liberal.

The central premise of this issue is that our nation’s universities should reflect America’s real diversity. I welcome this focus on diversity but suggest that we broaden it a bit. As both a university professor and the founder of an inner-city charter school, I would argue that any discussion of righting our unbalanced colleges must include the question of how to increase the number of low-income students. According to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, an independent advisory committee to Congress, students from poor families are only half as likely to attend college as their similarly academically qualified higher-income peers.

It was with numbers like these in mind that David Domenici and I started the Maya Angelou Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. Maya Angelou students are in school ten and a half hours a day, studying mostly core subjects. When not in class, they work in student-run businesses, where they earn money and learn practical job skills. The results have been impressive. More than half of our students had stopped even attending school on a regular basis before they came to Maya Angelou. Over one third had been acquainted with the juvenile court system. Nonetheless, more than 80 percent of our charter school graduates go on to college. What we have learned about helping disadvantaged students get to college is consistent with what other educators teach: Students must expect that they will go to college, they need to be academically prepared to go to college, and they must have the financial resources to go to college.

The number of politicians that rally behind the mantra of high expectations these days threatens to turn it into something of a cliché. That would be unfortunate, as

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anyone who works closely with disadvantaged students is acutely aware of the power of high expectations and the destructiveness of low ones. When I attended a mostly black, mostly poor and working-class Atlanta public high school, the slogan was "Stay in School." The emptiness of that exhortation became clear to me once I got to Brown University, as one of only a handful of my high school's graduates to go to college and the first to attend an Ivy League university in any teacher's memory. My Brown classmates had never been told to "stay" in high school. Finishing school was assumed. Their goals were to excel in high school, then in college, then in graduate school, and then in their careers. And so they did.

But high expectations alone aren't enough. While there is no single prototype for a successful school, everyone agrees on some essential components: sustained relationships with caring adults; a peer culture that pushes students to excel academically; a rigorous and engaging curriculum; an administration dedicated to supporting its frontline staff; sustained parental involvement in learning; and a school culture that demands excellence from everyone.

Still, students who expect to attend college and are academically prepared require yet one more asset: money. For many students, this means governmental financial aid. This is especially so since the purchasing power of Pell Grants (the nation's largest needs-based grant program) has declined, and tuition costs at public universities have risen at three times the rate of inflation.

If high expectations, academic preparedness, and financial access are the keys to college education, what must we do to put them in the hands of low-income families? Our first priority must be to invest in the capacity of schools that have proven

successful with low-income populations. The school choice movement has produced successful educational models around the country. Last year *TAE* visited some of those schools (See "[Model Schools: 14 Academies Where Kids Really Learn](#))," January/February 2001). The Boston non-profit Jobs for the Future has also identified many effective schools and programs. A great many of these schools, however, are upstart non-profits, with the desire, but not the capacity, to expand. Institutional

obstacles—including inadequate funding for basic operations and the difficulty of paying for school buildings—present huge barriers to expansion even for the most successful programs. Consider Maya Angelou Charter School: Despite our impressive results, we're stretched too thin to plan for growth.

Throw facilities into the mix and the obstacles become even more daunting. It took three years of relentless hard work—effort we should have been able to focus on education, not fund-raising—to obtain the resources necessary to turn an abandoned building on a drug-infested corner into a model school and inviting community center. Many civic leaders have asked us to expand to additional sites and accept more kids, but in a city full of abandoned buildings, nobody has offered a facility.

Our school is not alone. In most regions there is at least one model program successful at getting poor kids to college, but as long as such programs are denied funding and facilities for expansion, they will remain isolated models.

The next priority must be to take school choice seriously. Last term's Supreme Court decision upholding the Constitutionality of the Cleveland and Milwaukee school voucher programs was hailed by some as the *Brown v. Board of Education* of our

generation. The premise of the voucher movement is that it is immoral to deny poor parents the right to choose the best school they can find. If parents are willing to make the sacrifice to get their child to that school, then the government should facilitate that choice. But what if the best school available is located, as such schools often are, in a suburb? Taking school choice seriously means that poor children should not be denied the right to attend the suburban school either. Suburban governments near Cleveland and Milwaukee chose not to participate in the voucher programs, making their schools inaccessible to city kids. If it is immoral for government to deny children the freedom to attend private schools, how is it less so to deny them the choice of suburban schools?

Our final priority must be to ensure financial access for students from low-income families. The Higher Education Act of 1965 expires next year, and the coming debate offers a chance to address the problems identified by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. The Committee reports that if we do nothing to increase financial aid, over the next decade more than 4 million qualified students will be unable to afford a four-year college education and more than 2 million will be unable to afford any college at all. In 1970 President Nixon said, "No qualified student who wants to go to college should be barred by lack of money. That has long been a great American goal; I propose that we achieve it now." Next year's reauthorization offers us a second chance to achieve that worthy goal.

Expanding the number of low-income students on college campuses will certainly benefit those students, their families, and the nation's economy. But it will also make the college experience richer for all students, as they share dorms and classrooms with individuals from truly diverse backgrounds. Finally, I suspect it might also have an ancillary benefit that would appeal to some of this issue's authors: Given my experience in working with low-income teens, I predict that more of them will use their college opportunity to prepare for meaningful careers than to organize animal rights protests.



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